Through the Valley of Shadow

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Chapter 1

The poor in spirit

On a cold grey morning, a lone knight found himself in a stranger's house.

Opening his eyes, the room slowly came into view as his conscious mind reorganized following a dreamless sleep. He was in a warm but slightly dingy bed covered to his neck in the frayed sheets. Next to him, a fire burned slowly and quietly in a stone fireplace. The rest of the wall appeared much the same, composed of stone, and lacking any windows or ornaments.

Slowly, still somewhat fatigued, he looked around the room, trying to figure out where he was. The only feature he could make out from the firelight was a heavy

wooden door a few paces from the foot of the bed. While solid, he could discern no lock.

He slowly sat up, and pushed the sheet away. Noting that he was still in his armor, he reached for his side. Oddly enough, his sword was still in place. Puzzled, he warily got to his feet. Was he a prisoner? If so, why had his captors not disarmed him?

He closed his eyes, and tried to remember. Momentarily, facts and events began flowing back to him. His name was Enoch, and he was a knight for the chief city of the bronze people who inhabited the main part of the world's island continent. Most of the island was covered with forests and mountains save for the large city at the coast. Explorers had sailed around the world, looking for new lands, but in vain. Only endless ocean, inhabited by vicious sea dragons, waited beyond the island. Gradually the bronze people abandoned all

pretense of finding new things and resigned themselves to the only known land. It would have been a tolerable fate, if not for the endless war with the silver people in the east.

The origin of their people and their enemy was a mystery lost in time. An old legend depicted the world being formed by a great and powerful being called the One who IS. In those days, there were no bronze or silver people, but a golden race that had arisen from the mind and will of the One. But a rebellion had ensued, and the gold race perished in fire and flood. Their children had given rise to two new races, the silver and the bronze. The bronze had enslaved the silver for a time, but they escaped and fled and there was war. Then, something strange happened. Among the silver people, appeared one who claimed to be the One, who came to call his children back. Many of the silver people

and a minority of the bronze joined this new sect, although most disbelieved.

These legends, if they were legends, came to Enoch's mind because he had started to wonder if the silver race had taken him captive. A sudden stiffness began at the nape of his neck and, gritting his teeth, he reached up to massage the back of his head. Yes, he remembered now. He and his fellows had been on a routine patrol when a group of silver skinned people ambushed them. The ensuing battle had been fierce, but brief, and the last thing he remembered was one of the enemy's knights, a woman, bringing her blade down on his head.

His eyes widened at the thought, and his fingers instinctively ran over his skull, trying to find the wound. Morbid curiosity soon gave way to bewilderment. For he felt no gaping wound, but only a faint scar. Yet, he knew

he had been wounded. What had happened to him? Like most of his race, he was a practical, indeed somewhat cynical man, not given to belief in miracles or magic. And yet, and yet...

His brow furrowed and he looked down at his hands. They were strong, bronze skinned hands, made for combat, but looking as though he had not held a sword or worked hard in months. That didn't fit either. Slowly, hesitantly, he reached for the door, not knowing what else to do. It yielded to his touch, and he stepped out into the hall.

There was another door across the hallway from his own. Looking around, he saw that the two doors were at the end of the hall. To his right, he saw an open doorway leading to the main part of the building. Another fire could be seen there, and he detected a faint odor of

tobacco. Somehow, that assured him that he wasn't in a formal jail, but rather a private home. But whose?

Suddenly, the door opposite him opened, and a woman stepped out. Enoch drew his sword, for he instantly recognized the silver skin and armor of one of his enemies. The woman, for her part, stepped back, startled and reached for her sword as well. They were warriors, more used to strife than peace, and had each long ago learned that quick action often separated the living from the dead.

As the two sized each other up, Enoch studied her features. Neither particularly beautiful nor ugly, the woman was about his size and had the same shade of dark hair as his. Her blue eyes blazed with the prospect of dueling.

"You!" the two combatants cried out simultaneously. Each recognized the other from the ambush that had somehow brought them here.

"You're the one who attacked me," Enoch realized. "I should be dead."

"You stabbed me at the last minute," the woman replied, not letting her guard down any more than he was. "The next thing I remember is finding myself here. If you've come to finish me, you will find it easier said than done."

Enoch paused. Her words implied that he was no more her prisoner than she was his. But what then? Were they prisoners of a third party? If so, then who were they? The only choice he could think of was some rival faction among the silver skinned. The bronze people were more or less unified, but he didn't know enough about the silver to be able to say the same.

"I see that both of you are up and about," a deep booming voice called.

Enoch and the woman whirled around to the passage at the other end of the hall. A large, somewhat overweight man in rumpled clothing stood there. In one hand, he held a pipe, revealing the source of the tobacco smell. He had a ruddy complexion, thinning hair, a high forehead, and a very intense, ironic stare. Despite looking like a cross between a farmer and an old professor, the eyes suggested knowledge far surpassing the ordinary man.

"But why do you stand, poised to fight?" the man asked, taking a puff on his lit pipe. He exhaled, and the pungent but homely smell had a strangely calming effect on them. "You are in no danger. Were you prisoners, you would have been locked in."

"What is this?" Enoch demanded. "Who are you? How did we get here?"

The man remained calm. "My name is Joshua. I found the two of you wounded, and brought you here, to my place."

"Where are the others?" the woman asked. Like Enoch, she still grasped her sword, and tried to divide her attention between the two men.

"They have gone ahead," Joshua answered. "If you feel well enough, you can catch up with them."

"It was you who healed me?" Enoch asked. "I don't remember much of what happened, but I should be dead."

"You have had some healing, but require more," Joshua said. He took another puff of tobacco before continuing. "Come, come, put down your weapons. Do you even know why you are fighting? Can't you talk to

one another, introduce yourselves to one another? That may seem silly, but countrymen like me value manners."

For a long moment, neither moved. Both wanted to trust the mysterious stranger, but had lived lives where trust wasn't an option. Still, there was something about the place, something which seemed to speak to them, soothing their fears and compelling them to trust.

Slowly, Enoch lowered his sword. "My name is Enoch, knight of the bronze race," he told them. He looked at the woman. "I've been a warrior for many years, and fought many battles. Yet never until today have I been so wounded." He looked at the man. "You have my gratitude." He looked at the woman. "And you have my respect."

The woman nodded grimly, acknowledging his compliment. She lowered her weapon, replaced it in its sheath, and held out her hand.

“My name is Vera," she said. "I am a knight of the silver people and a worshipper of the One who IS. Though we know the art of war, we may also make peace."

They shook hands, albeit warily, and Joshua smiled. "That's better," he said encouragingly. "Now, come with me. You need something to eat, I'm sure."

He turned, and led them to the other room. The fire burned steadily on the hearth. A table and chairs set with bread and water awaited them. The door and windows were opened, letting in more light. As they sat down, and Enoch saw his host in better light, his eyebrows rose in shock.

The man had golden skin.

"You…you're no bronze man," he said. "I could have sworn you were."

"I thought you were silver, like me," Vera said. "You're not. You look like the tales of our ancestors."

Joshua put down his pipe and began to pull the loaf of bread into three parts. "That is so," he said, handing two of the parts to his guests and keeping the third for himself. "I have been here a very long time."

Enoch took his offered piece, and began to eat, past the part of mistrust, but still very uncertain as to what was really taking place. "Do you live alone? Have you any neighbors? I don't recall being near a village before the ambush."

"Nor I," Vera said.

"I live alone," Joshua said. "I grow a small field of wheat outside, and from that I get a great deal of my nourishment. I live close to a river and fish occasionally too."

Warily, the two continued to eat, marveling at the fact that despite being enemies, they were accepting the whole affair. Their host chatted with them, remaining friendly, but elusive. Enoch asked him again about his appearance.

"If you are a golden man, then that means there are more of you," Enoch remarked. "Are the legends true about an older race?"

"Certainly. The silver and bronze men are brothers of the same fathers," Joshua said. It's a pity, isn't it, that they forgot so soon, and wage war for control of their island. It's ten thousand miles from coast to coast. There's plenty of room for all. Yet war and greed abound." He sighed and shook his head. "A great pity," he repeated.

"What do you mean 'their’ island? Where are we now?" Enoch asked. His face expressed dismay, as though he were beginning to suspect something.

"Well…I don't think I can tell you in so many words. I think I will have to show you. Finish your meal, and then come outside with me."

Joshua began to eat again, but Enoch shook his head. "Look…thank you for your healing, but I need to know now."

He kept eating, silent and unperturbed.

"Are you ignoring us?" Enoch asked. The calm atmosphere was beginning to melt away, and he was starting to get a little angry.

"I don't think we're going to get any answers," Vera remarked. "Except on his terms."

"You seem to be taking things well," Enoch replied. "I don't know who either of you are. I don't even know what I'm doing here; we're supposed to be enemies."

Joshua cleared his throat rather loudly, and they looked at him. His eyes seemed to stare through them, making them nervous, but seeming to quiet them. The golden man took a drink of water and motioned for them to do the same. For several minutes, they just sat in silence; the only sound was the crackling of the fire.

Presently, Joshua stood, and relit his pipe. Signaling for his guests to follow, he walked outside. With a wary glance at each other, for they were enemies, Vera and Enoch left the table and went after their host.

Outside, the temperature had warmed somewhat, but the day remained grey and somber. Enoch looked behind him, and surveyed the house from whence they came. A simple cottage, it occupied a relatively small

area and only had a single story. The walls were composed of simple stones, and the roof was thatched. Curiously, he could make out no background; the empty field behind the house gave way to a grey fog after a few dozen yards. What, if anything lay beyond, he couldn't say. The view immediately in front was obscured by rows of cultivated wheat. Joshua waited for them there, motioning for them to hurry.

"Come, come," he said.

Then the golden man turned and walked through his field. The two knights followed, and after walking several paces, became aware of the sound of running water. Soon, they made it through the field, and saw the banks of a river, flowing roughly southeast.

"We need to follow this river," Joshua told his companions. "Then you will see where you truly are."

So, they followed, noting both the clarity and the unfamiliarity of the river. Never had either knight seen such a river, and Enoch knew that they were no longer in their familiar country. A sense of unease steadily grew in him, as though he were somewhere he didn't belong.

Presently, they came to the edge of a cliff. The river tumbled over, forming a great waterfall. But that was only the beginning. The cliff they now stood on stretched around for miles, forming the largest valley he had ever seen. The valley was as deep as it was wide; the floor was so far down that it could barely be seen. Still, it was clearer than the country behind them, and Enoch could get a basic view of the layout of the land.

The terrain was not sheer, but angled in such a way that journeying down would be strenuous, but not impossible. Furthermore, after several hundred feet, there was another fairly level stretch of ground that

appeared to contain a small forest. The waterfall there resumed its course as a river, and sloped down into the forest. As he looked further down, he saw that the level ground dropped again until it revealed a second terrace containing a second forest. This forest was sparser than the first.

As Enoch strained his eyes, he saw this pattern repeated several more times. In all, the great valley had seven terraces, each separated by a drop in elevation by several hundred feet. The river, however, only went down to the third terrace where it terminated in a lake. Furthermore, after the fourth terrace, the valley changed, becoming rockier and more barren.

The overall effect suggested that the valley was leading somewhere, and sure enough, it did. At the very bottom, obscured by the distance involved, was a large castle. It was pure white, and seemed to glow with an

inner light. Its towers and walls were so massive that it could easily house hundreds, if not thousands, but the journey there would take at least several days.

Joshua waved his free arm over the whole vista. "What you're seeing is not to be found in your country," he told them. "You see, this is another world. One that once had strong ties to yours, but was cut off when your ancestors fought against the One who IS. Yet still, there remain doors open to it. You two found such a door."

Enoch felt fear rise up in him. More and more, it looked like the legends of the silver people were true. "The One who IS...exists?" he asked tensely.

"Yes." Joshua pointed to the castle far below. "That is his."

"Then...we are dead?" Vera asked. She seemed nervous too, but not as afraid as Enoch. But of course,

Enoch thought bitterly, she and her people believed the legends while most of the bronze, including him, didn't.

"Yes," Joshua answered them. "You are in a state of, for lack of a better word, limbo. You must go down to the One and appear before him."

"No!" Enoch cried out. Joshua looked at him questioningly. "If the One is real, and if he is there, it is no place for me."

"Why not?" Joshua asked.

"Because I'm not a servant of his," he answered. He turned around to look at where they had been. "Is it possible to go back to where we came from?"

"No. There is no going back. There is only going on."

Vera addressed Joshua. "I will go if I may go either alone or with you." Her eyes narrowed as she looked at Enoch. "You have shown honor thus far, but you are still

a bronze man. The bronze men kill my people. They cannot be trusted for anything else. Believe me...I know."

"Nor do I trust you," Enoch replied. "Still less the One who IS. I remain here."

Joshua shook his head. "There is no other way." He took a puff on his pipe, and blew smoke in their direction. Presently, they felt their fears begin to subside. The same calm that encouraged their trust in the house slowly returned. Enoch realized that it was something in the smoke, something that...

"No. It has nothing to do with 'mind control,'" Joshua said, addressing the unspoken suspicion. "I will not force anything on you." He held up the pipe before putting it to his lips again. "All this will do is calm your fears, enabling you to make your own choices with a clear mind.

"Now then, you two knights, Enoch and Vera, are from opposite sides of a war. After slaying one another, you were brought here to another world. I am to be your guide in this world. You must journey to the castle of the One. It lies below at the floor of this valley. But first, you must go through the seven realms that make up the valley. That is your path."

"But how are we to know that you are not leading us into a trap?" Enoch asked.

"You don't. You must trust."

With that, the man called Joshua walked away from them. He stopped at a point where the drop didn't seem so sharp, and stopped to wait.

Vera began to follow. "I will go," she repeated. "You will do what you will."

Enoch looked behind him. Only cold desolation waited for him there. Then he looked forward. Despite

the fear he felt, the valley radiated certain warmth that he had not noticed before. In spite of everything, it gave him hope. Perhaps there would be time and opportunity to deal with the One who IS.

Silently, he followed his newfound guide, and made his first step down from the ledge.

Chapter 2

Those who mourn

The first part of the journey took nearly an hour of picking through rocks, and slowly moving downhill. There were no switchbacks on the path, and progress was very slow. The trio frequently had to reach out and steady one another, despite not fully trusting each other.

But soon, they reached the level ground of the first terrace. Joshua had them sit and catch their breath.

They drank the cool water with their cupped hands. Then they sprinkled the water over their heads to wash.

"We have several miles to go before we reach the next slope," Joshua told his companions. "We will need to go through the forest, and most likely won't make it through in one day."

"Are the woods dangerous?" Enoch asked.

"There are predators, yes," Joshua said quietly. "Dangerous and clever. But if we follow the river, we will reach some friends who can give us shelter."

He stood up and stretched. "We should be on our way," he said.

They walked along the bank of the river. The sun came out as the day progressed, warming them and lifting their spirits. The water gurgled contentedly beside them, and a cool breeze caused the grass to ripple as they walked. There were no animals and no other sounds

either. For a time, Enoch's former life seemed like something long ago, as if he had more or less always been here.

Trees appeared on the horizon, and they reached the edge of the forest. The river continued to flow through, and there was still sufficient space by it to walk without any real trouble. But while the path was clear, they could see that leaving it would mean getting caught in briars and weeds between the trees. Craning his head, Enoch could still see rays of sunlight shining through the canopy of forest, but now only dimly. Still, oddly enough, he could see no animals, no sense of any presence other than their own.

"This place is strange to me," Vera remarked to their guide. "I don't know why, but I feel a certain…oldness about it."

"It is old," Joshua confirmed. "As old as time itself. The One fashioned this world, and the golden race with the power of thought.

Then he created the mortal world from whence you came. There was to be free travel between the two, with the golden race as the One's overseers. However, they first had to learn lessons here. They had to learn how to be obedient, just, loving, and merciful."

"They didn't," Vera said, remembering the stories all silver children learned.

"Some of the golden people grew bold and impatient. They went to the mortal world before the One would have handed it to them. In their arrogance, they tried to set up their own rule."

"Then, if that wasn't folly enough, then they returned to paradise and tried to conquer it as well. They perished and all seemed lost," Vera answered,

nodding. "Then Tabitha, the blind prophet was born. She was a voice in the wilderness, speaking of the One. Shortly after that, the One came back to the silver people to teach and call us back to him."

"Yes. But the way back is toilsome, and few make it."

"I heard about the One's visitation long ago," Enoch said. "I once knew an old woman..." he trailed off.

He hadn't thought of her in a long time, and didn't want to now. So, he changed the subject somewhat.

"I never heard what happened after the One’s supposed journey to the silver ones," Enoch told Vera. "Do you know?"

"Of course; all my people do," she said, somewhat sharply. "He was killed by bronze men during a raid. So was Tabitha, the prophet. But he came back to life, proving who he was beyond any doubt. Then he returned

to his world, asking all to follow. This the silver men have done, as best they could."

She paused, and shook her head. "Strange. I never thought I would tell these things to a bronze man."

Their guide smiled slightly, and continued to lead them through the forest.

Hours passed. The day waxed, and began to wane as the afternoon progressed. Periodically, they stopped to rest and snack on fruits hanging from some of the trees over them.

Then, they reached a stone gate.

It seemed to come out of nowhere. One minute, the path went on forever, and the next, they were at a clearing in the woods. An open gateway bisected a fence made of high cobblestones. Walking through it, they saw that the clearing was bordered on three sides by the

fence while the east was bordered by the river. The interior was neatly trimmed. Only short grass grew inside here; there were no trees until one reached another gate on the far side where the forest resumed.

What the clearing did contain, however, were dozens of neatly arranged black tombstones.

"Joshua...what is this place?" Enoch asked. The graves unnerved him, particularly since they were all unmarked and gave no explanation of themselves.

"This is where we will spend the night," their guide answered. "As to the what and the why, you will find out."

From the opposite entrance, a man and woman entered and approached the nearest gravestone to them. Like Joshua, they were golden people, but older. Both had large frames, and looked like they were once very powerful before age and care brought them down to

their present state. Their hair was grey and their eyes downcast.

In their hands, each held several wildflowers, picked from elsewhere in the woods. These they placed on the grave beside them before kneeling. The man put his arm around the woman, and the two began to cry silently.

Vera, moved, took a slow step forward. She knew nothing of them, but wanted to do something for these unhappy people. Joshua, however, placed a gentle but firm hand on her shoulder, and shook his head. For sometimes, the grieving need to be left alone.

The old couple stood, and Joshua stepped forward with his charges. "Good afternoon, my friends," he called out.

The man looked up, and smiled. Though the grief didn't fully leave his eyes, he brightened noticeably.

"Joshua. I see you have brought more travelers to the One's castle," he said.

"Indeed. This is Enoch of the bronze men, and Vera of the silver."

The old man shook hands with them. The woman, to Enoch's surprise, actually hugged him.

"How tired they look," the old woman said gently. "How long and wearisome is life in the other world. My children, you are most welcome."

"Children?" Vera echoed.

"Of course. Don't you know us?" the woman asked. "You, I would have thought, should recognize me."

Vera shook her head and the old woman appeared disappointed. "Ah, well, perhaps time and corruption cloud your view. We are the first of the gold people, and thus, parents of all men."

"What?" Enoch protested.

Vera looked around. "This place isn't where I would expect my first ancestors to live," she admitted.

"It wasn't always so," the man replied. "This place was once a garden when the One made both it and us. But some of our children rose in rebellion, and made it a graveyard."

He sighed heavily. "What you see are the graves from that first great war. There have been many since. My wife and I stay here as caretakers."

"But not forever," the woman said. "There is much to suffer, but one day, the One will set all things right."

Enoch looked about the graveyard and saw little hope. He thought of his own life, the deaths he had seen and the deaths he had caused. How could one find hope? Granted, 'good' had to come from somewhere too. To say it came from nothing made no sense to him. All things considered, once he took time to think of it, he

could believe there was a One. What he doubted was complete goodness in him when faced with undeniable suffering.

"How do you know that?" he asked the woman.

Vera bristled at his question. "What do you know of it?" she snapped. "It seems to me as though you bronze men cause most of the strife. All my life, from my childhood on, I have seen death and pain that..."

"Please," Joshua interrupted, raising a hand. "There is enough unhappiness here. Do not add to it."

The old couple embraced each other and hung their heads, not in shame, but in sympathy for the two knights. Enoch looked around nervously, while Vera folded her arms and continued to frown.

Joshua addressed the old man. "I don't think we will travel any further today. I would like to lodge here with you tonight."

The man nodded, although Enoch didn't relish the thought of spending the night in a graveyard. Fortunately, however, they were led out via the far gate back into the woods. Against the cemetery's other wall, they would see a small stone hut. The old woman went inside, but the man led them to a fire pit in front of it. Kneeling down, he took nearby sticks and began to arrange them crisscross, building a miniature cabin. In the center of this, he put dry leaves and trigs.

He pointed to a wood pile on the other side of the cemetery gate. An ax lay there too. "Enoch, would you mind splitting some of those logs?" he asked. "Once we get the fire going, my wife will bring out some fish to cook. When the coal bed is ready, you can throw a few logs on and have warmth all night." He looked sheepish. "You will have to sleep outside, I'm afraid. Not enough room in the house."

"Don't worry. I've slept in worse places," Enoch assured him. He walked over to the wood pile, and picked up the nearest log. Setting it on the ground far enough to strike, he picked up the ax. Two or three swipes were all that was needed to split it in two.

Enoch felt rather grateful for the simple chore. It kept him from having to face Vera, for whom he still felt mistrust, and some hostility. After all, she was an enemy and didn't seem inclined to enjoy his company either.

The sun began to set by the time he had split most of the logs and stacked them next to the now roaring fire. The old woman came out of her house with several fish. Enoch rested, satisfied with his work, as dinner was cooked and consumed.

Afterwards, they sat around the fire as the sun sank below the horizon. Joshua took out his pipe, and began to smoke. From a pocket, the old man pulled out a small

recorder like instrument and began to play. Enoch had never heard the song before, but there was a sadness and sweetness about it that stirred the innermost core of his being. Memories of friendship and home came to him, unbidden, memories of a time when he was still young and had not yet gone to war to 'prove' himself to his father and neighbors.

He looked up at the night sky, and noticed something strange. The sky was almost entirely black. There was no moon, and only one corner of the heavens seemed to have a cluster of stars occupying it. The rest was a void.

"Why do the stars look like that?" he asked Joshua.

His guide looked up himself, and pointed. "That is your world, that little cluster of stars. It seemed to fill your sky only because you were in the midst of it."

"How far away I am from home then," Enoch said with a sigh. Whenever Enoch had thought of life after death, which wasn’t

often, he had supposed that the dead would go on existing in the same world as the living. He assumed they walked along, unseen, or were in an underworld, or something like that. Never did it occur to him that the afterlife was, in fact, a different realm entirely.

Joshua looked at him and continued to smoke. "As I said, the way is through, not back. But don't worry now. Relax. Take your rest."

Enoch nodded, seeing no other course to take. He listened to the music, looked at the fire, and smelled the smoke of burning wood and tobacco. Slowly, peacefully, he lay down and drifted to sleep.

Enoch awakened several hours later in the dead of night. The fire still burned, but the flames had died down. Only the red coals remained now, giving off plenty of heat but relatively little light. He noted that someone, probably the old woman, had put a blanket on him while he slept. In the dim firelight, he saw Vera and Joshua similarly bundled and fast asleep. The old man had retired for the night.

He saw something move out of the corner of his eye, and sat up. A dark shape was floating silently on the water. The lower part he couldn't make out, but the upper portion was man shaped, and seemed to be watching him.

He stood and drew his sword, for there was something about the shape he didn't like. He was on the verge of calling out to his companions when a hand raised and held its palm outward. The shadow then

beckoned to him with one hand, and with the other, held a finger to where its mouth should've been, signaling for quiet.

Warily, Enoch looked around, and then followed the figure as it continued to glide down the river. He didn't notice Joshua's eyes open and watch him go. The golden man nodded to himself, as though not surprised at the shadow's appearance. Then he rolled over and went back to sleep.

Enoch walked along the river bank, his eyes on the figure, which he took for a man in some type of boat. It moved until they were both out of sight and hearing range of the cemetery encampment. Enoch waited, still holding his sword, ready for whatever move the stranger made, whether friendly or hostile.

"You have done well to meet with me," the figure said in a powerful, confident male voice. "The woman,

even if she had seen me wouldn't even hear me out. Will you, or are you determined to fight?"

"I can talk peacefully if you wish," Enoch replied. "Will you show yourself first?"

"Ah. Wisdom and valor. How rare," the man chuckled. He held up his hand, and Enoch could see a spherical object in it. From within the sphere, a light began to shine, illuminating the figure like a torch. Enoch took an involuntary step back, and held his sword tighter when he saw the man.

He was golden, like all the people Enoch had met in this country, but stronger and more handsome than anyone he had ever seen. His long hair and beard were braided, and his lips were set in a haughty smirk. Even more alarming, however, was the thing that the man rode on.

It was no boat, but a living dragon.

Like the dragons that ruled the seas of his world, it was fifteen feet long, and covered with green scales. It had neither wings nor the ability to breathe fire, but didn't need to. Its mouth was full of razor sharp teeth and its four limbs ended in six inch talons. Back home, no one could ever hope to tame and ride one as this man now did.

The man smiled arrogantly at him. "Impressed? Good. I am Molech, a scout for the army of the gold people. I search for those who are worthy to join our war against the so called One who IS."

"What do you know of him?" Enoch asked. For he still dreaded meeting him, even though he knew that was where he was going.

"He is a deceiver who holds anyone he can, including our poor, foolish parents who tend the burial ground," Molech told him. "But we, some of the children,

saw through him. He claimed to create this land, by virtue of his being there before, but we decided that was a lie. The world is a mystery, to be sure, but one day we will solve it. We have but to remove our enemy."

Molech looked back where they had travelled. "It has been a long fight," he muttered. "But we have taken the lowest plateau before you reach the castle. Soon, our siege will be at an end."

"What is that to me?" Enoch asked. The account chilled his blood, though he hardly knew why. "I'm not even supposed to be here. What do you want of me?"

"I came to warn you against Joshua," Molech said. "He is leading you to the One."

"I know that."

"But what you may not know is that the One will not allow you to remain neutral forever. Neither will we. You are in our world, now, and must take a side. Don't tell me

now, but when we meet again at my camp, you will have to answer them. Think it over."

Molech replaced the sphere in his pocket, and without another word, rode his dragon down the river so swiftly that he was gone in a minute. Enoch replaced his sword in its sheath, and pondered this new development. He had left one war only to be walking into another one, it seemed.

What should he do? Could he trust Joshua after all? He had wanted to, but was now unsure. He felt he needed to know more, so he snuck back to the camp. The others were still there, so he lay back down by the smoldering fire. He had time to decide, so for now, he could remain with them, rather than risk travelling in this unknown wilderness alone.

He was unable to get warm, so he got back up and put another log on the fire. But somehow, the night grew still colder.

Chapter 3

The meek

The next morning, Enoch rose and stretched his aching body. He had not slept well since the late night meeting with Molech. The others rose, and the old man stepped out of the house with a small knapsack.

"There's food in here," he told them as Enoch accepted the gift. "Your next stage in the journey will be fairly easy, but harder roads await just the same."

"Thank you," Enoch said, studying the man. Was he really being deceived, as Molech had said? Or was Molech the liar? Looking into the simple, honest face, he

saw no deception on the old man's part. Nor did he seem such a fool, so Enoch remained in doubt.

They turned to go, and the man clasped their shoulders. "Go in peace," he said. "Remember what you saw here, and be careful lest you also have cause to mourn."

Enoch nodded, and Joshua led them away. They walked in silence for a long time. Passing the place where he and Molech had spoken, Enoch looked at Joshua. The guide was watching him, with a knowing gleam in his eye. Somehow, Enoch could see that he was dealing with one from whom it would be impossible to keep secrets. So, he decided to speak plainly.

"You know, don't you?" Enoch asked.

Joshua nodded once, but didn't stop. The three kept walking, side by side.

"I saw you last night," Joshua confirmed.

"What are you talking about?" Vera asked.

"There was a spy from the enemies of the One," Joshua told her.

"He said you were not what you seemed," Enoch said to the gold man.

"What will you do then?" Joshua asked neutrally.

"Look. Are you simply leading us into a trap? If so, I would rather fight fairly. I've been battles, laid siege to towns..."

"I have no doubt," Vera growled. Enoch ignored her.

"I've been ambushed before. But I've never done anything like this. I've never spied nor deceived. So, tell me the truth."

"There is no trap," Joshua answered, unconcerned with the challenge in Enoch's voice. "But there are lessons to be learned before you reach the castle. In time, you will find them out."

Soon, they found themselves at the end of the woods, and on the verge of going further down to the next terrace. But this time, the incline was not nearly so sharp, and they walked at the same pace. It was a slanted meadow, leading to another forest when the ground leveled out again. But this forest looked far less dense than the previous one, and the three could hear the songs of birds coming from it. The river, meanwhile, widened but its flow slowed noticeably, becoming more placid.

After finishing their descent, the trio entered the new forest. Overhead, birds flew, and the sun shone brighter than it had since they had arrived in this place. Joshua hummed a tune to himself, reached overhead, and pulled a fruit off one of their trees to eat. Enoch and Vera did likewise.

A rustle in the bushes made Enoch stop in his tracks. Suddenly, a lion poked his shaggy head out to look at them. Both he and Vera gave a small cry and drew their swords. Joshua smiled but made no move to defend himself; he carried no weapon anyway.

The lion stepped out on the pathway and roared, though not near as loudly as Enoch would have expected.

The knights brandished their sword at the beast, but it seemed unimpressed. Enoch remembered an occasion when he saw someone mauled by a lion, and didn't plan on suffering the same fate.

But Joshua shocked both warriors when he walked right up to the lion. Reaching out, he actually began stroking the lion's mane and scratching its ears as if it were no more than an ordinary housecat.

Enoch's jaw dropped. "It…it can't be," he stammered.

"I knew it," Vera whispered. "I long suspected it, but this only confirms it. He's a sorcerer; he must be."

"I am not," Joshua replied, turning back to them. The lion crossed the path, and walked to another nearby grove of fruit trees. "This land is one place where the war between the One and the golden men never reached. For that war caused not only corruption of the heart, but also chaos in nature itself. Disease, excess pain, death, all these resulted. But here, things are as they were always supposed to be."

He pointed to where the lion had gone, and the knights looked. The lion began to eat fruit off the lower branches. After a few minutes, another creature came out of the bushes. This was a sheep, and it bleated at the lion, making no attempt to hide itself.

As if this wasn't strange enough, the lion responded only by grunting and slashing with his paw at an overhead branch. The tree limb crashed down, and the sheep went over to eat its own meal. When finished, the two animals stretched out for a nap side by side.

Enoch and Vera saw more of this as they progressed. Field mice chattered and scampered about, despite hawks and other birds of prey flying overhead. A pack of wild dogs prowled in the distance, ignoring completely some sleeping rabbits in the shrubs nearby. A bear cub chased a fawn, but only in fun, without any of the hunting they would have expected in the so called natural world. The bewildered knights had long since sheathed their swords and simply took it all in.

Presently, they came to a place in the road where a large boulder was placed to one side. Perched on this was a woman.

"Hello there," Joshua called out.

"Good day, travelers," she answered with a smile. "Come, let us get better acquainted."

The stranger jumped down from the rock, giving them a better look at her. She was a silver woman, but her skin and hair were very pale. She was dressed in a dingy torn gown, and had a bandage wrapped over where her eyes presumably were. She was very thin and frail, but not emaciated, and seemed to be in overall good spirits.

"My name is Tabitha," she said after steadying herself. "I am a wanderer in this land, with no home or permanent companion. But I am trying to reach the next terrace in this valley."

“Tabitha?” Vera asked. “As in the Tabitha? Prophet of the One?”

“I am she,” the other silver woman replied.

"I am Enoch," the bronze knight told her. "You may come with us, if you wish. We are going to the castle at the bottom, and will be passing through there. I'm sure our guide wouldn't mind."

"Of course not," Joshua said.

"I should hold onto your arm," Enoch said, gently taking hold of her. "I see you have no walking stick."

Joshua nodded his approval, and resumed walking. Vera looked surprised at his simple act. She had not seen much kindness from the bronze men.

They walked through the woods until late afternoon. Tabitha asked them about their lives. While Joshua had had little to say, Vera and Enoch spoke of their world and its wars and other customs.

"The world has changed very little since I left it," Tabitha remarked.

"What of you? Have you always been here?" Enoch asked. “I mean, since you died.”

"I have had to rely on others to bring fruit for me to live on,” Tabitha answered.

"Have you had any meat?"

"Not in a very long time."

"There are probably some in the provisions given us," Joshua told her. He looked around. "We may as well stop for the day, anyway. I'm hungry and we still have time."

The knights agreed, and Enoch put Tabitha down before reaching into the pack. Sure enough, there were cooked pieces of fish wrapped up in bundles, some blankets, and materials to start a fire. Enoch gave some of the fish to his company and began to make a small fire, as the sun was setting.

"I think I'll remove this bandage," Tabitha remarked, pulling at the cloth on her head. Enoch nodded, but only watched her through the corner of his eye. But when she had done so, Vera gave a small cry, and put a hand over her mouth. Enoch looked over, and sprang to his feet when he saw Tabitha.

Beneath the cloth, she had no eyes.

Nor did it look as though she had ever had them. There was only forehead. Tabitha, for her part, started to eat her fish as if there was nothing amiss.

"You...were you...have you never seen at all, then?" Enoch sputtered, though he knew what a stupid question it was.

"Seen?" Tabitha echoed. Her brow seemed to furrow, but without any facial features beyond nose and mouth, Enoch couldn't be sure. "I have heard of it. It's supposed to be filled with things called shapes and colors. Once,

someone tried to explain it to me, but I couldn't follow. It is said there is healing to be found in the terrace below. That's why I wanted to go there."

"There is indeed," Joshua said. "The river ends in a lake, and its waters have that power. I know Enoch and Vera will take you there."

"You can count on that," said Enoch.

Chapter 4

Those who hunger and thirst

The next morning, they set off on the road again. The animals behaved much the same way that they had the previous day, but Enoch paid them little heed this time. He was more concerned with Tabitha, and doing something for her strange predicament.

But the prophet turned beggar woman seemed unconcerned. She had replaced the cloth about her head

when she realized that her uncovered features bothered them, and just kept on speaking. She felt no doubt that she was going to be healed.

The forest ended, and they were faced with another drop, sharper than the previous one, but still manageable. They walked down and reached the fourth terrace. Off in the distance, they saw the lake where the river ended. Enoch wondered where Molech was, although he had not seen the dragon rider since that night. He had the feeling, however, that the scout would show himself when he wished to be found.

As they walked, they heard a faint moan in the air. Looking forward, the group saw two more knights sprawled on the road ahead. Enoch approached, Tabitha still on his arm, expecting them to be more gold men. To his surprise, however, they were a bronze and silver man. Moreover, he recognized the former as a member

of his company back home before the ambush that brought them here.

"Alfred! Is it you?" Enoch exclaimed, kneeling down quickly and pulling Tabitha with him.

"Hey! What is it? What's happening?" Tabitha protested.

"I'm sorry. But I know this man," Enoch explained.

"Enoch, is that you?" Alfred asked, smiling weakly. He held out his hand, and Enoch clasped it. Vera reached over, and did the same with the silver knight.

"Yes, old friend. Just relax," Enoch said gently. He turned to the others. "Alfred and I grew up in the same village together and completed our training under the same instructors. Alfred, what happened? How did you get here?"

"I'm not really sure. We were attacked, as you know. I found myself in a fierce duel with the man next to me.

After exchanging blow after blow, I finally ran my opponent through. But then, I felt a blade in my back and lost consciousness.

"I awakened several hours ago in this place. Some of the others were here with me, along with some of the enemy. There was talk of resuming the fight, but we didn't."

"Why not?" Enoch asked. Unlike some others he had known, he didn't particularly enjoy killing. He did what he did more out of loyalty to his countrymen than anything else. Still, there was their duty to think of.

"I don't know," Alfred confessed. "But somehow, it no longer seemed to matter. We started talking amongst ourselves, and found something out. We all believed in the One."

"And the others?"

"We never saw them."

The silver knight stirred, and Vera helped him to a sitting position. "Did you hear that, Stephen?" she asked, clearly recognizing him. "Is it all true?"

"Yes commander," the silver knight called Stephen replied. "We all started walking towards the lake in the distance. We weren't sure why, but we knew that would take us to the One. But this bronze man, Alfred and I fell back. I guess we were the weakest."

"How could you trust him anyway?" Vera asked.

"It no longer seemed to make any difference, commander. In this world, we are on the same side."

"I find that hard to believe," Vera said. "The one I've been thrown in with has surprised me by proving himself more noble than most. But a bronze man is still a bronze man."

Stephen sighed. "Yes, I suppose you have reason to think that. Your father, after all..."

"Don't. Not in front of him," Vera cut him off and glanced back at Enoch.

"We need to be moving," Joshua informed them.

"Enoch, do you have something to eat?" Alfred asked. "I think it might help. We're so weak, so tired."

"Yes. Hold on," Enoch replied. He opened the knapsack, took out some fish, and handed it to his friend. Then, he handed Vera another pack for Stephen. Alfred ate, and seemed to recover some of his strength.

"I think I can stand," he told Enoch.

He unsteadily lifted himself up, but he wavered and had to sit back down. Stephen did no better.

"I will need to help you," Enoch said. He stood up and handed Tabitha to Joshua. "Will you take her, so I can get my friend to the lake too?" he asked.

"Yes. We will all go," Joshua said.

Enoch bent back down, and pulled Alfred up. Vera followed suit with Stephen, and the six all resumed their journey.

They reached the lake, and looked at it. The river emptied into its clear, placid waters. Nearly fifty feet deep, all manner of fish swam in it.

Alfred's face brightened. "Let me in the water. Let us drink together."

"Maybe you should first," Enoch said as he lowered Alfred to his knees. "You probably need it more."

"There's plenty for all," Alfred said as he lowered his head to drink. Scooping his hand in the water, he raised the water to his head, and sprinkled it over him. Then after a moment's hesitation, he reached for the seaweed, grabbed a few leaves, and ate them.

Enoch watched as a change came over his old friend. As he ate and drank, his form increased in both

solidarity and vitality. Then, standing up on his own, he looked around him in amazement.

"I see now," Alfred whispered. Tears of joy came to his eyes. "I see everything."

Stephen, meanwhile, also drank and ate from the lakeshore. He stood up and laughed. The two went over to one another, and embraced, the last remnants of their enmity gone. They no longer appeared as ghosts, but more alive than anyone Enoch had ever seen before.

"Are we here?" Tabitha wondered. "Will I see?"

"Yes," Joshua said. He led her to Enoch. "You take her," he told him.

Enoch pulled the cloth from her head, and led her to kneel at the lakeshore. Putting his hands in hers, he guided her in scooping up some of the water to drink herself. She sipped for a long time, and her skin color

improved. Strength seemed to flow into her, but she still couldn't see.

Enoch glanced back at Alfred's still wet face and got an idea. He reached down, took a handful of water, and pressed it to her forehead. He held it there for a long time. Then, he felt the fluttering of eyelids, and removed his hand.

Eyes had appeared in Tabitha's head, or at least, eyes of a sort. They were smaller than normal, and pink like an albino's, but they were functioning as the pupils dilated and contracted in proportion to the light, and moved normally. Her newly formed brow furrowed in concentration, and she moved her head from side to side.

"Are you all right?" Enoch asked. "Tabitha, can you see?"

"I...I don't know," she responded. "What is before me has changed. It was all one for so long, and now, I think I

am seeing. For there are more things now. The shadows move, and what is that between them? Is that light?"

"I think so," Enoch answered. He held up his hand. "Do you see this?"

"Yes."

He held up her hand and clasped it. She smiled with understanding.

"You are in front of me! I'm seeing you!"

"Not entirely, though, from the way it sounds," he answered. He reached back into the lake, took more water, and pressed it to Tabitha's eyes again. After holding his hand there for what he thought was the same amount of time, he took his hand away again.

Now her eyes were normal sized, and bright blue. Tabitha looked at the water, then at him, and then at the grass.

"I see it all now," she said. "This is color and shape, isn't it?"

"The water is blue. The grass is green," he told her.

"Now those words have meaning," she said, nodding. They stood and she hugged him. "Thank you."

Enoch's eyes misted as he returned her embrace. He felt he had done well. Even Vera's eyes softened for a moment before she remembered her resentment of bronze men.

Joshua walked over to him. "Now is the time for you to take the water, Enoch," he said.

"Why? I'm not weakened or sick," he protested, taken aback.

"The body healing is only part of the water's power," he told him. "It also heals the wounds of the soul. Drink of it and you will see the One face to face. You can then go directly to him, thus shortening your journey."

Enoch hesitated at that. For while he didn't doubt the water's magic, he still dreaded his meeting with the One, not having served him and only nominally believing in him in his earlier life. Although he knew the meeting was inevitable, he still wished to postpone it if possible.

"What if I don't?" Enoch asked. "Or at least, not now? Will I have another opportunity?"

"You must take a drink or take that chance," Joshua said. "I make no further promises."

"I will drink," Vera said, but Joshua shook his head. "You cannot yet. You still harbor too much anger and it wouldn't work for you. There are some of the lessons you both must learn. Enoch needs trust, and you need to forgive."

There was genuine pity in the eyes and voice of their enigmatic guide. "But I suppose they won't be learned this day."

He looked at the others. "What about you? Will you drink again?"

"I will," Tabitha said. "I want to know all."

"We are tired of wandering," Alfred said. "We will, too."

The three knelt and took one final drink. As they stood up, they began to glow brightly, making the other three shield their eyes. Then, they began to slowly fade away.

"Do you see it?" Stephen asked the other two. They were now looking ahead.

"Yes. It's wonderful." Tabitha replied.

Alfred looked at Enoch. "You should have drunk," he said, as they continued to fade from sight. "But don't worry. We will meet again. Just keep to the path."

Then, they were gone, leaving Enoch with his two original companions. They stood, as though in a daze, for

a long time. Then Joshua silently led them to walk around the lake.

When they got to the far side, Joshua showed them some rocks. They picked through these until they came to the other side. Their way would now grow more difficult.

Chapter 5

The merciful

They continued their descent into the valley, and found themselves in a field lined with only a few trees and rocks. Now, instead of the river, a great stone wall followed the pathway on the right side. Enoch thought he could make out the sounds of a scuffle, but was unable to see what was beyond.

After a few miles, the wall changed directions, and came across the path. Cut into the rock, they saw two

doorways, each seven feet tall, and without doors. They each had a different border; one had a bronze streak of paint over it, and one had silver. Joshua walked through the right one, and turned to look back at them. Enoch followed, but suddenly stopped in the middle of the doorway.

"Ow! Hey!" he groaned, stepping back and rubbing his forehead.

"What is it?" Vera asked.

"Something's blocking this way. Some invisible barrier," Enoch said, pointing to the door.

"But Joshua walked right through," she protested.

"I'm an inhabitant of this country, and not as bound by its rules as you are," the guide called out.

"Well, let's try the other one, then," she decided, walking to the left doorway. She bumped into an invisible barrier herself.

Enoch looked at the two doorways, thoughtfully. He noted the different colors above the top, and got an idea. He went over to the left one himself.

"Maybe we have to use the gate that matches us," he said.

But the attempt yielded the same result, and the two looked at the gateways in frustration.

"Perhaps if you try to go together," Joshua suggested.

They looked at each other for a moment, nodded, and each went to their matching door. Walking at roughly the same pace, they waited for the force field to hit them again, but nothing happened. They simply made it to the inside of the wall.

"Now that that's taken care of, where do we go now?" Enoch asked Joshua.

"Our direction changes to the southeast," he answered, pointing. "Come on."

They walked towards a grove of trees, and came upon two men seated on the ground, glaring at each other but not moving. Enoch intended to raise his hand to hail them, but when he thought to do so, Vera's hand shot up in a salute instead.

"My hand! Something grabbed it," she cried out. She tried to use her other hand to pull it back down, but instead, Enoch's right arm began to dig into his left. He cried out in surprise and pain, and the two sitting knights looked in their direction. One of them, a bronze, smirked at the other, a silver.

"Shall I tell them, or should you?"

"Let them be," the silver one replied. "They'll figure it out."

Enoch's arm throbbed from where his fingernails dug. It was beginning to draw blood, and he tried to pull his arm away. Next to him, Vera's other hand shot away from her side and her arm bent backwards, as though by some unseen force.

"This isn't working," Vera said, panic creeping into her voice. "I can't move!"

Enoch cried out as his fingernails continued to gouge his other forearm. The pain became such that he couldn't concentrate on making movements or anything else.

Abruptly, both of Vera's arms fell back to her sides. She sighed in relief, and no longer thought about trying to grab her arm again. Enoch's grip released, and his arms fell back to his side as well.

"That was strange," Enoch said to her. "Did you feel it?"

"Yes. I was trying to grab my arm, and you grabbed yours instead."

"I have a feeling...Vera, can you visualize me walking over to those two?" he asked, looking at the other knights. He seemed to retain control of looking and speaking.

"Why?"

"Just try."

Suddenly, without his willing it, his left foot picked itself up and took a hesitant step. Then he walked, or rather, was walked over to the two seated at the tree. They glared bitterly at him, and let out scornful laughs.

Enoch then looked at Vera, and willed her to come and stand beside him. Her feet obeyed his wish to move. Joshua, meanwhile, watched everything in silence.

"Our actions have been reversed, somehow," Enoch answered. "By walking into this place, we lost control of ourselves, and gained it over each other."

"Very clever, Enoch," the bronze one said with mock praise. "Oh yes, I recognize you. Frankly I'm surprised it took you this long to realize the truth about this place."

"You can still move your own head," the silver one pointed out. "But of course, that's it. You need to keep your head if you're to keep from being harmed here."

"I do know you," Enoch addressed the other bronze man. "You're Otto, from my company. Are there others here, too?"

"Most of them are here," Otto answered. "You couldn't be alone in this trap even if you wanted to be."

"This place is only a trap if you wish it to be," Joshua said, sadly. "It is actually a lesson. You could escape if you worked for each other and not yourselves."

"Where would we go?" Otto shot back. "I've heard rumors of a siege between gold men and the One. I want nothing to do with either of them."

"Nor I," the silver man agreed. "So, when we figured out what had happened to us, we decided to sit here, away from the fighting."

Suddenly, a crowd of bronze and silver people came running towards them. It presented a strange sight, to be both running and struggling at the same time, but that was the behavior of the runners. One of them, another silver man, looked over at the seated men.

"You! I thought I'd find you soon enough," he growled at Otto. "I remember that you were the one who killed me. Don't think that will go unavenged."

He glanced at the silver man seated opposite Otto. "You had better give him up. Or you will pay as well."

"Take him," the silver man said. Instantly, Otto found himself standing, and running towards his accuser.

He turned back to his former companion. "We agreed," he protested.

"Would you have done any differently for me?" the silver man retorted.

"So be it," Otto growled. The silver man stood up, and despite screaming and cursing, also ran to the crowd. Swords were drawn as the silver men used the bronze to attack Otto and vice versa. But, because they were ghosts, no one died. They just hacked at one another, crying out in pain, but neither bleeding nor falling.

"Vera, run!" Enoch shouted, wanting only to leave this horrific, pathetic struggle. The two ran away, fortunately deciding to go in the same direction. Joshua followed.

It wasn't long before they came upon another pair. A silver woman was screaming in rage, and tearing at her clothes. A bronze man was grinding his head into a bolder nearby. Neither one seemed to be making any progress with the other.

Enoch felt his hand reach out and draw his sword. Realizing Vera's intention, he tried to protest, but before he could, he had made several slices at the bronze aggressor. The woman stopped struggling with herself, and nodded to Vera, but was too exhausted to speak.

The bronze man, of course, wasn't dead, but only glowered at Enoch's feet.

"I don't know who you are, but you should mind your own business!" he roared. Looking around wildly, he saw Vera. "But of course, it was her doing, wasn't it?"

The silver woman with the torn dress tackled Vera, and began beating her with her fists. Enoch's own hands

came up, and fastened themselves around the other bronze man's neck. Vera had learned quickly how to fight in this insane realm.

"Joshua, help us!" Enoch shouted.

"I can't. You must help yourselves," the guide called back.

Enoch felt fear and dismay creep into his thoughts. Was there no way out of here? Would they all be fighting themselves forever? As much as he dreaded the One, he feared that possibility even more.

But wait. What did Joshua say? Help themselves? Suddenly, a grim smile came to his lips as he realized what he had to do.

He looked at Vera, and willed her to throw her attacker off. The other silver woman collapsed in a heap, and Vera stood up. She looked over at Enoch.

"That was you," she said, surprised.

"Yes! Now help me," he called out.

His hands released their grip on the other bronze man, and he stood up. He then looked at the silver woman bound to him, and she stood up and began running towards them.

"We need to get out of here!" Enoch said, willing her to run back in the general direction of the path. To his relief, she looked back and willed him to follow.

"You've shown me kindness," she told him when he caught up with her. "I won't leave you in this horrible place, even if you are a bronze man."

Joshua followed as they ran past another group of combatants. A swordsman swung his weapon at Vera, but Enoch willed her to raise her own blade to parry. The attackers seemed angry at the idea of their cooperation, and began to pursue them.

Enoch stumbled, but Vera picked him up again. She seemed to tire as they fled, but he wished strength back into her. Presently, they saw the wall that surrounded this terrace. As with the entrance, the exit consisted of a bronze and silver marked doorway. Behind them, the crowd of angry warriors pursued, seeing in the two betrayals of their side of the war back home.

Vera and Enoch dove through their respective doors, with Joshua behind them. Once outside, they found out too late that they were at the end of the terrace, and hit the next slope. They lost their footing, and tumbled to the ground, rolling down several dozen feet. Fortunately, the hill wasn't rocky, and by the time they came to a stop at the bottom, they had only suffered bruises.

Enoch just lay there for a moment, exhausted both physically and mentally. Once his heart's pounding slowed to a more manageable level, he hesitantly tried to

raise his arm. To his relief, he found that his movements had returned to normal, and he staggered to his feet. Vera still lay sprawled on the ground, and he gently shook her. She also stood, and Joshua clapped his hands once.

"Well done! You found the way out," he congratulated. "You learned to show compassion for one another."

They looked back up the hill to see what had become of their pursuers. Behind the doorways in the wall, they could still be seen, but none of them had made it out. They wanted to leave, but they didn't want to trust each other, let alone the One. So, they had, for the most part, taken to fighting again amongst themselves. A few of the smarter ones were struggling to their designated exit, but were pulled back by the corresponding enemy they were bonded with.

Enoch and Vera turned away, no longer wanting to gaze at what they had so narrowly escaped. Focusing ahead, they saw that the land before them was rocky, and mountainous. Joshua pointed to where the path resumed, and motioned for them to come.

"We will reach a cavern by nightfall," he told them. "There, you can rest for a time.

"I must confess, Alfred was right," Enoch said. "I should have drunk from the lake."

Joshua smiled, but made no reply.

Chapter 6

The pure in heart

For several hours, they walked through the rocky pass. Enoch craned his neck to look at the walls of rubble that flanked them. The sky overhead began to

cloud over, and a light rain came. However, before they could get too soaked, the entrance to the cave appeared.

The entered the cavern only to see that about fifty feet away, the cave ended in a dark lake. Joshua sat down on the floor, and took the knapsack from Enoch. They spread out the blankets and took out the last of the provisions.

"Where do we go from here?" Enoch asked.

Joshua finished his piece of fish, and took his pipe out. "We can leave the blankets after tonight," he told them. "There will be a place for fresh provisions later. The path ahead is going to take us underground for several days."

He stuffed his pipe with tobacco, lit it, and pointed to the lake. "We are going to have to swim," he informed his charges. "By going down that pool, we will reach the hall of mirrors."

"What are they?" Vera asked.

"You will see." Joshua made no further explanation, but continued to smoke his pipe calmly.

"Sleep for now," he told them. "I will keep watch, but we are quite safe here."

They slowly drifted away into unconsciousness.

Enoch awakened the next morning feeling much better. The trials and terrors of the last several days seemed to be slowly falling away, and he felt ready to face whatever lay ahead. Vera and Joshua stood nearby, speaking in low voices.

"Good morning. I hope you slept well. You are going to have to dive into the lake, now," Joshua said when he saw the knight awake.

"In my armor?" he asked dubiously.

"You will need it later," Joshua said. "You can leave the knapsack, however. Trust me."

Joshua led them over to the lake. As they waded in, Enoch felt for sure that he was going to be frozen, but to his surprise, found the water fairly warm. The armor weighed heavily on him, however, but he had no choice except to follow Joshua in diving below the surface.

The water was fairly clear, and owing to the weight of their armor, they went down easily. Enoch watched as Joshua continued to paddle further and further down. He followed, despite feeling the steadily increasing pressure of the water.

He was just beginning to run out of air when he saw the bottom, or what he thought was the bottom. Beneath the lake was another cavern whose floor was covered with a soft green mass. But what made no sense was

how he could see what was below him. Was the lake floor transparent?

To answer his question, Joshua continued to swim downward. Enoch and Vera struggled to do the same, but were almost out of breath. They plunged after him...

...and suddenly, were falling through air to the moss patch below.

They landed unhurt, and gasping for air. By the time they had recovered their breath, Joshua was already back on his feet and waiting for them. As they stood, he pointed up.

They looked and saw what had happened. The ceiling of this cavern was also the bottom of the lake. Enoch could reach up, and place his fingers in the water as if he was reaching into a cup of water. How the water remained suspended, he couldn't tell, but then, everything about this country was strange.

They saw a tunnel, and walked into it, slowly moving away from the underground lake and back further into the earth. It was surprisingly warm for a cave, and their way was lit by stones that glowed with their own inner light. The soft moss continued to grow on the floor like a carpet, and gradually, the tunnel expanded to the point where the three could walk side by side.

Eventually, they came to a longer grotto, where Joshua had them sit for lunch.

"We can eat some of the moss here," he told them, picking some of the green spongy growth off the floor and handing it to them.

Enoch put a piece of the sponge in his mouth. It had a slightly bitter, but not unpleasant taste to it.

After resting, they continued. The cave grew far narrower and more cramped than the ones they had previously gone through. But there were glowing stones

in the walls which increased the further along they got. Soon, it became as bright as daylight or indoors.

As they walked, they noticed a change in the rocks. They remained bright, but instead of glowing brightly, they took on a more transparent quality. Enoch could see himself reflected back, albeit in a distorted manner.

Mildly amused, he walked over to one of the walls. But his reflection grew dimmer rather than clearer. However, another image came into view, one from long ago.

He saw a farmhouse back on his own world with a group of silver knights walking by. One of them, a very strong and handsome young man, broke off from his battalion, and made his way to the house. A peasant woman with a sweet and honest face appeared in the doorway and smiled, while a little girl, about six years old, ran out to meet the man.

"Daddy!" she exclaimed. The man smiled, knelt down, and held his arms to the girl, clearly his daughter.

Vera gasped, and Enoch glanced over his shoulder. Her eyes were wide, and she had a hand over her mouth.

In the reflection, the little girl cried out in joy, and flung her small arms around her father's neck. He lifted her up, and walked to the young woman in the doorway, who smiled once more, and put her arm around him.

"I have a week to stay here," he told her. "Then we move out again. The next campaign will be hard, but we can take them."

The scene blurred, and changed to the interior of the farmhouse. It was night, and the room was lit by a single torch in the wall. The wife of the silver knight stood over a bed, tears running down her face. Another

knight stood at the other end of the bed, looking on her with sympathy.

Her young husband lay dead on the mattress. His chest had been hacked to pieces by several swords. It wasn't difficult for Enoch to infer what had happened, even before the knight in the vision addressed the new widow.

"He was surrounded by bronze knights, he said consolingly. “He never had a chance, but he took out three of them in the process. He died a hero."

The woman shook her head bitterly, and buried her face in her hands. While his words gave some comfort, they would not raise the dead. But she didn't have long to think of herself.

The pattering of small feet could be heard, and the little girl appeared in the doorway.

"Vera! Stay there; don't come in," the woman exclaimed, running to grab the child.

Enoch jumped at the revelation of the child's name. But really, it seemed obvious now. He was seeing Vera's darkest memory. That would mean that later on…

"I want to see daddy," the girl protested, distress in her little face.

Her mother tried to restrain her, but the child wriggled out of her grip, and made it into the room.

She froze as her gaze fell upon her murdered father. For a moment, nothing happened, and nobody moved. Then Vera screamed with such anguish that it brought tears to Enoch's own eyes.

Behind him, Vera sobbed, but before Enoch could react further, he saw what he dreaded to see. The reflection changed, and showed a nursery, containing a sleeping bronze baby. It was his turn now.

The nursery door opened, and a stern looking, finely dressed bronze merchant entered, leading a heavyset middle aged silver woman. The woman's eyes were downcast, and she was dressed in the simple dress of a prisoner.

"Your name is Marta, isn't it?" the man asked when she stepped in."

"Yes, master," she said quietly.

"Good. Remember that. You are a prisoner, and I have bought you. But I'm not a cruel man, and you should find your workload easy here." He pointed to the crib. "Have you had any children?"

"Five, master," Marta said. Indeed, everything about the woman's appearance and mannerisms suggested maternity.

"Good. This is Enoch, my son. You will help my wife in caring for him and the house. Treat him well, and you will be treated well."

No, Enoch thought. Please don't show this. Not in front of...

But because he had seen Vera's pain, so she must see his. The scene wavered, and skipped ahead several years. The crib was replaced with a bed, and Marta lay on it, breathing laboriously. Enoch, now a teenager, knelt beside her.

"Marta," he whispered tensely. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes, Enoch," she replied, weakly. "My time grows short."

"Father is sending me to become a knight," he told her. "He says his trading caravans need protection. I'm going to miss you."

"I haven't seen my own children for years," she answered. "But the One sent me you in their place."

Enoch licked his lips, as though weighing his words. "Marta…does the One really exist? There seems to be too much evil in the world."

She laughed weakly. "You are a bronze man, yet speak like a silver one. The bronze people, overall, are a practical lot. Not given to deep thoughts and wonderings. They simply do whatever seems best to them in the moment."

She frowned. "That is why they enslaved the silver people long ago. We were fewer in number and it seemed easy for them to make us do their work for them, rather than do things themselves."

"I'm sorry." Although it happened long ago, Enoch felt a twinge of guilt.

"It was not your doing," Marta said. "I blame you not."

"The silver people broke away," Enoch pointed out, hesitantly.

"Yes. The silver people are, on the whole, more inclined to ideas. We came to believe in the importance of freedom for all. We broke away, but war has been ever since."

She looked at him. "Enoch, you will be a knight. Perhaps, you could be a force of change."

"I will, Marta. I will."

But he hadn't. He had been trained and then simply fell into place. The bronze people indeed were more practical than ideal. Perhaps that is why the One had come to the silver people and more silver than bronze people believed.

"But the One is for all people," Joshua said. "Silver and bronze alike. Practical things, ideal things, all that is good comes from Him."

"I didn't keep my promise," Enoch said. "I forgot, maybe even on purpose. It was easier, it..."

Tears ran down his face. The view skipped forward a few days, and teenage Enoch knelt at Marta's bed, holding her hand.

"I want to believe," he whispered. "But how can I? How can I in the midst of suffering?"

Marta looked at him, and tried to focus. "Some evil we cause ourselves, and some is brought on us by the wicked. But the One exists. He will not allow it forever. It will be set right, one day. Believe that."

She seemed to weaken further, and Marta slowly, peacefully, breathed her last. In a place far from home,

far from her own children, she had died. Teenage Enoch shook his head, and gulped back tears.

The view darkened, and adult Enoch saw only his own face now. He was crying now. Behind him, so was Vera, and not only for herself. They looked at one another.

"Your father," he said.

"Marta," she whispered.

He nodded once and walked up to her. Then, they were in each other's arms, embracing and crying, for they now understood one another. The anger and doubt of both was known to the other.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know," he said, between his crying.

"It wasn't your fault," she answered, finally believing that herself. "You didn't start the war. You were not one of the slavers."

"I could have done something."

They felt a hand on each of their shoulders, as Joshua clasped them both. "Now you have learned to let go of hate," he told them. "Only without hate can you hope to be pure enough to see the One as he is."

Chapter 7

The peacemakers

They continued to walk. The tunnel didn't ascend, but somehow, the air seemed to grow less stale. Gradually, a light came into view from far away, and grew as they approached.

When they came to it, they discovered that it was an exit. They left the cave, and looked around at the land. A field of barren rocks greeted their view, and when they

craned their necks upward, they saw that they had passed completely under the fifth terrace, and were now at the sixth. They would probably reach the castle by tomorrow.

They walked about a mile until the sun set. A stone hall appeared on the horizon, and Joshua told them that this would be where they would stop for the night. They knocked on the door, and a silver man answered. He smiled broadly when he looked at the three.

"Come in!" We were just preparing dinner," he said.

"Luther," Vera said, recognizing him as another one of the knights that had died in the battle bringing them here. "Whose hall do we come to?"

"It was waiting for us."

They walked into a brightly lit hall where several knights of all colors were dining. There was a roast in the center of the table, accompanied with loaves of

bread, salad, and fine wine. All those seated were chattering good naturedly, but quieted down when Luther presented his guests.

The silver woman at the head of the table stood, and raised her hand in a salute. They saw that it was none other than Tabitha. "I bid you welcome, honored guests," she greeted. "You may share at this table, so long as you are peaceful. Joshua, it is good to see you once more."

He smiled and the other knights, their fellows, welcomed them. Food was passed around to them, and they began to eat. As the meal progressed, they told one another of all that they had seen and experienced in travelling. They had all had to travel the same pathway as Enoch and Vera had done. Sometimes in pairs, sometimes in larger groups, but none had made the

journey alone. Moreover, Joshua had guided them all to this point before leaving to gather more of their people.

“He said that he had to get all of our company who had died that day in battle,” Luther said.

“Those who would come, that is,” the bronze man who had travelled with Luther added. His name was John. “There are many still in the prison of the merciful. Too many of us couldn’t look past the war, or past ourselves.”

“Though you were men of war, you have learned the importance of peace,” Joshua told them all. “Wars are the result of the original rebellion against the One. Not all who are caught up in them are guilty of sin, per se. Yet, they were not to be part of the original plan.”

He looked at Tabitha, who stood. She waited for all the knights, bronze and silver, to quiet down and look at her. Then, she began to sing.

The One who IS, he dwelt alone,

Though lonely, he was not.

Complete in himself, his forever throne,

yet still, the world, he wrought.

For he is love, itself, and thus he made

a world, to have no end.

The gold people, he created and bade

to love themselves and him.

He taught them knowledge and his ways.

Showed how to care for life.

For this, gold men should give their praise.

Instead, they did make strife.

Beyond the valley was another place,

a world for them to run.

But they grew impatient, abused his grace.

Some disobeyed the One.

Molech and his brethren went to the world.

They took it for their own.

Before the One’s gift could be unfurled,

across it, they did roam.

They married and were given in marriage.

Silver and bronze men they bore.

The One’s instructions they did disparage.

Then, they disobeyed more.

Great men, they once were. Yes, men of renown.

They built their castles of stone.

Nations they founded, with cities and towns.

They hunted and ate flesh and bone.

From the One, they stole the world, and yet still

their greed was far from sated.

They wanted the valley, too, to fulfill

desire. Their doom was fated.

Back to the valley on dragons, they went.

Fought loyal golden ones.

Slew they very many, but strength was spent.

They tried to fight the One.

Instead, the One trapped them here for all time.

Then he built the graveyard.

Never again, from the valley they'll climb.

The dead, they do stand guard.

Molech and his company, for killing

kin, must fight for ever.

The dead will rise, their justice fulfilling,

the One’s decree, that never,

that never again, will they break the world,

though try and try, they might.

From place of honor, themselves they did hurl

down. The fate of their fight.

In the world, meanwhile, their children did grow.

Their history, they forgot.

The One, and beginnings, they didn’t know.

Amongst themselves, they fought.

Then, among the silver ones, I was born.

Tabitha, without eyes.

When they first saw me, they pitied and scorned,

but the One made me wise.

He gave me teachings, messages and dreams.

Yes, and prophecies, too.

He had me tell them ‘All’s not as it seems.

I’ll come to be with you.’

So he came, one day, to teach us his ways,

until, by treachery, slain.

He taught us that at the end of our days,

we come to him, again.

We all make the long pilgrimage to him,

through the shadow valley.

Here, you choose to come, and join in his hymn,

or to Molech, rally.

This journey, all bronze men and silver must,

till the last one, on the last day,

has made the decision: rebel or trust.

After that? Truly, I can’t say.

The song ended. They applauded, and Enoch posed a question to the group.

“Molech came to me in the night, shortly after my journey began,” he confessed. “Has he done so with any of you?”

As it was, he had indeed. Sometimes to a bronze man, and other times to a silver. Sometimes to just one, and sometimes more than one in the same company. Sometimes openly, and other times secretly. But in some

form or another, Molech always tried to sow discord and strife between them and the One.

“You have learned compassion, mercy, and trust,” Joshua told them. “Now, the final test will come. You must choose to go to the One, or to Molech.”

Tabitha pulled three objects out of her pockets and showed them to the knights. One was a sphere, like the one that Molech had used to light his way in the dark. Only this one had seven seals on it that covered the surface. For it to show any light, the seals would have to be removed.

The second object was a ram shaped horn. The final object was a small bowl. Enoch, Vera, and the others looked at the prophet, who smiled and explained.

“Tomorrow, you must face Molech one more time. The reason for this is, you must choose whether to side with him, or the One. Defeat him if you can. If you

cannot, if he captures you, then you must use these objects to call forth the One. Remove the seals from the sphere. Blow a single trumpet blast on the horn. Finally, gaze within the bowl. Then you will have His help."

"But worry not tonight," Joshua added. "First, take your rest here, where you are safe. Let tomorrow take thought for itself."

Chapter 8

The persecuted

The next morning, they were roused and after a small breakfast, were conducted to the back door by Tabitha. Those who still didn’t have their own picked up swords and shields as they went. Enoch was given the sphere, Vera the horn, and Joshua the bowl.

They looked at each other, and slowly made their way down the stairs. The descent was tense but uneventful, and they made it to the bottom step with relative ease. The exertion required for steps proved far less than the mountain sides.

Joshua fell behind them and the knights proceeded, looking warily from one side to another. It was very still there, and not a whisper could be heard from the tents. They drew their swords, and held their shields close to them, awaiting whatever would come.

Then, a shout could be heard from the encampment. Someone had spotted them, and a few gold knights

emerged. One of them, whom Enoch recognized as Molech, rode the same dragon he had at the earlier meeting.

Enoch and Vera stood their ground. As the dragon rode up with the others following closely behind them, Molech looked down on them.

"So, have you made your choice, Enoch?" he demanded. "If so, stand aside while I slay these two. Then join us, and I will make you one of my commanders."

Enoch's choice lay before him now. Surprisingly, now that it came, he found it surprisingly easy. It was no mere matter of belief of action, but called for total surrender to the One. But he had seen traces of the One at work already; in Marta, in Vera, and in Tabitha. Moreover, it no longer seemed optional, but necessary.

"I have," he answered, and drew his sword. "I will not join you. Let us pass."

Two of Molech’s guards rushed them with drawn swords. One of them attacked Vera, but she held up her shield to parry the blows. She raised her own sword, and crossed steel with her attacker. She managed to hit him in the wrist, severing his hand. He howled, more in rage than pain, for he was also a ghost.

Enoch, meanwhile, beheaded one of the other knights, and watched amazed, as the body reached down, grabbed its head and ran off. Molech snarled, and guided his dragon forward. It reared up, and swiped a claw at him. He held up his shield in time to parry, but was forced to his knees. Molech smiled, and swung his beast's head down to the fallen knight. The dragon's jaws opened wide to tear them apart.

Enoch thought quickly, and swung his sword upward. He managed to put out one of the monster's eyes, but his sword was knocked out of his hand in the process. The dragon roared, and Molech barely managed to keep from tumbling off. He caused the dragon to blindly swing its tail, hitting both him and Vera, still engaged with a third enemy knight.

Their shields cracked, and they were hurled to the ground, wincing in pain. Vera lay in shock, her breathing shallow, and her eyes beginning to lose focus. The enemy knight got back up, and rejoined Molech, who advanced slowly on his mount.

The other knights also fought, but were overcome. While they had fought valiantly, still they were no match for the golden warriors. Molech laughed as chains were brought out to bind them, even Joshua.

Chapter 9

Insulted, persecuted, reviled

They were left in a tent with three guards. A golden man identified himself as Chemosh, a bronze as Baal and a silver as Mot, respectively.

"What fools you are," Chemosh gloated at Enoch, Vera and the rest. They were tied up and glowered at their captors.

"Did you really think you could defeat us?" Baal asked. "We have been at this far longer than you have even existed."

"What's the point?" Enoch demanded. "Even if that's true, what has it gotten you? You are trapped in an endless siege with the One's castle. What hope of victory do you have?"

"More than you, that much is clear," Mot answered.

"Besides, we have what you do not," Chemosh agreed. "Freedom. We don't serve the One. We serve no one, but ourselves. I'd rather be free in a tent than a slave in a palace."

"Freedom?" Joshua asked. "What is freedom? To act without anything directing you?"

He shook his head. "There is no such thing. If you will not serve the One, then you will serve another. If not another, then an ideal. If not an ideal, then your own appetites. But you are never 'free.'"

"Is that so, wise man?" Baal mocked. "But what of the vaunted ideal of free will? I thought the One valued that so much."

"Free will is the freedom to choose your master." Joshua said. "Not freedom from a master."

"So then, our desires are our masters," Mot said. "So what?"

"Have they given you victory? Happiness? Peace?"

Mot spat on the ground, and Chemosh shook his head. "No use convincing these. They aren't as smart as you two were."

"Oh yes," Baal told them. "We walked the same path you did. Then we were captured by Molech. When we saw we could not overcome him, we asked for mercy. And he gave it. All we had to do was throw away the objects you took from the last house and join him. That's all it takes."

"It's not how you start but how you end that matters," Mot added. "So, how about it? Are you still so foolish? So stubborn? Why not accept the inevitable. Give in."

"If you aren't going to fight us, then go away," Vera said. "We're not giving up."

The three laughed at them. They knew, indeed Enoch and Vera knew, that they couldn't defeat Molech on their own. They had tried and failed. What then? Would they just sit here, tied up in one of Molech's tents? For how long?

"Why don't you come and take what we have?" Enoch challenged.

Chemosh flinched, but still smiled. "Oh, no, I couldn't do that," he mocked. "Where would your precious 'free will' be then?"

"He means that he cannot," Joshua said. "They have tried with other travelers, and it didn't end well. They have fought this battle and made travelers choose their final path over and over. Yet still, they will not free themselves from their own vicious cycle. That would mean admitting defeat."

Chemosh grew angry, and kicked Joshua. "Quiet, you! I don't need to hear your lies anymore! You want to sit here? Fine! Don’t say I didn't warn you, though!"

The three left, and Enoch looked from Vera to Joshua to the others in their company. "What now?"

"You see that you cannot make the final step yourselves?" Joshua asked.

"Yes," Vera said. Does that mean that there is no hope?"

"There is always hope. But it must come from the One."

"How?"

Joshua stood. The ropes fell off. They fell off of them as well. Enoch stood, followed by Vera and the others. Enoch removed the seven seals from the sphere. As he did so, it began to glow as Molech's had done several nights ago.

Vera raised the horn to her lips, and blew a single blast on her horn. Outside, they heard the rustle of footsteps, and Enoch tensed. He expected their captors to run into the tent to confront them. But they didn't. Enoch looked at Joshua, who held up the bowl.

"Come and see," he said to them all.

They gathered around, and looked into the bowl. It was empty, but the bottom showed a reflection, not of themselves, but of the graveyard they had journeyed through at the beginning. Where the graves were, they saw the ground began to rumble. To their mingled amazement and horror, they saw that the golden men buried there were emerging.

But they were not corpses or skeletons. Fully armored, living golden men broke to the surface, mounted on dragons. Then, they took to the air and flew in the direction of Molech's camp.

Chapter 10

Rejoice

Enoch and the others were led outside. Overhead, dragons took flight, and the risen warriors fought against Molech and his army. With swift strokes, they disarmed and routed the enemy. Molech and the others shouted and panicked, trying to fly away. But dragon after dragon fell, and the enemy was soon grounded.

Angry and frightened, they staggered to their feet. Molech, in particular, saw them and tried to run towards them. But the dragons swept down and picked them up. Then, they flew away, back towards the first terrace. In the distance, they dropped the evil ones that they had swept away.

Joshua held up the bowl again, and had the people look into it. They saw the men who had fallen at the

edge of the valley. For several moments, they didn't move. Then, they stood up again. Looking around, Molech cried out in anger and dismay.

The view in the bowl changed once again. This time, they saw the graveyard of those who mourn. To the open holes, the warriors returned. Dragons and all, they sank back into the ground, and the dirt covered them back up. In a moment, it looked as if the graves had never been disturbed at all.

"Why is this happening?" Enoch asked.

Joshua replied, "It is because they have been returned to where they were at the beginning of your journey. When the next group of departed souls comes through the valley, they will once again tempt and protect, strike and be stricken. The trials and choices are the same for all."

"Yet always, the same result."

"For them. The evil are punished and the good avenged over and over. But for those who come through the valley, the result depends on whether they follow the One, or the One's enemies. They did tell the truth when they said that it is how one ends that matters, not how one begins."

"What about when the last souls pass through?"

"Only the One can know that."

He beckoned to them all. "Follow me."

Single file, they followed Joshua to the castle. The door was open, and they walked in. To their surprise, it was empty. A vast crystalline room stretched to the roof, and no furniture was to be found there. Instead, at the far end was a doorway that had light streaming out of it.

“I will need the horn and sphere back,” Joshua told them. “They are to be for the next group of pilgrims through the valley. All tests will be reset. Even Tabitha

has been returned to where you found her, eyeless, and in need of compassion.”

Enoch and Vera gave him the objects. Joshua put them in his pockets, and smiled.

“Rejoice and be glad, travelers! Your trials are ended. The One awaits.”

Then, Joshua himself began to glow. When they could see once again, the simple farmer was gone. In its place, stood a cherub, four headed, six winged, and overwhelmingly powerful.

They gasped, and Enoch asked, "Who are you? What are you?"

"Here, I am Joshua," he answered. "In the beginning, I was called Calculon."

Then he sang the following song:

I was before the war you fought began,

Before men were either silver or bronze,

I was there before the golden men ran,

before the first sunrise or the first dawn.

I was there when the foundations were laid.

I saw the One make earth, sea and the sky.

I witnessed the universe being made,

though I made it not, I saw with my eyes.

For before the elements and matter,

through his will, the one made light and spirit.

We firstborn, angels, watched atoms shatter

and combine. The One's work, we revered it.

Not in creation, in the One glory.

That lesson we knew before start of life.

Creation only began the story.

Before your time, your ancestors made strife.

Men rebelled, disease and depravity
entered creation, and also men's death.
Separated by sins' activity,
and so when all of you draw your last breath.

I serve as guide through the shadow valley.
If you choose the One, you won't be bereft.
Or be damned, if to Molech you rally.
Either way, you meet me, angel of death.

I guide because I see the gravity
and consequences of sin and despair.
I see the end of good and depravity,
because at the beginning, I was there.

"What is your name now?" Vera asked. "Your real name?"

"It is Death."

"The One dwells beyond," Joshua said. "Will you go?"

They walked in to meet the One. None looked back.